

A New Voting System: Let's Get It Right The First Time

By County Councilmember Marilyn Praisner

The Gazette, December 21, 2001

Contrary to what Allan Lichtman might imagine in print (Gazette December 7, 2001), we are all committed to "making every vote count" with an updated voting system in every county throughout the state.

The devil, as they say, is in the details.

The state of Maryland has only now, in December, chosen a vendor for the touch-screen voting they propose to introduce in Montgomery, Prince George's, Allegany, and Dorchester counties by next September's primary.

This would leave Montgomery County only nine months to implement a totally new, fully tested and operational voting system. That means replacing 5,000 voting machines in 230 polling places, training 3,000 election judges, and informing over 450,000 voters.

Any missed deadlines, mistakes, or further delays could undermine the integrity of the 2002 election – and leave the County up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

Lichtman cites the performance in the state of Georgia as evidence that this timeline is doable by the September primary. But Georgia is already way ahead of us:

- A call to the Georgia secretary of state's office revealed that some Georgia counties began voter education projects on the new technology this past September – our voter education program isn't even ink on paper yet.
- The state of Georgia piloted the touchscreen voting in 13 municipal election last month, complete with exit interviews and evaluation to work on the bugs – Lichtman would have us implement the change with no pilot polling places and no time to work out the inevitable bugs.
- Plus – get this – as it stands now the state of Georgia "hopes" to implement touchscreen voting in one-third of the 159 counties in Georgia in time for the primary – not state-wide as Lichtman implies.

Lichtman also mentions the success of touchscreen voting in the city of Baltimore. That's right. But, again, what Lichtman does not say is that Baltimore

made the decision to change voting systems in early 1995 but did not fully implement it until the 1998 elections – nearly three years, not nine months.

Fortunately, we have reached agreement with the state of Maryland that the state and county will work together on a mutually acceptable phasing plan where Montgomery County would make as much progress as possible in 2002 and complete the change, if necessary, by no later than the 2004 election. And we will implement the change in a way that addresses the legitimate concerns of people with disabilities.

Let's get a new voting system for the County as soon as possible – but let's make sure the system works right the first time. To do anything less – or rush to implement a not-fully-baked plan – is to risk public money that's in short supply these days and, equally important, to possibly risk the integrity of our elections themselves.

#

Marilyn Praisner chairs the County Council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee and is a vice president of the Maryland Association of Counties